

State Department Blundered in Cuban Crisis

Failure to Brief Congress Could Have Had Serious Consequences

By Rowland Evans Jr.

WASHINGTON

President Kennedy did his part to consolidate the nation, and a good deal more, in the gloomy aftermath of the Cuba fiasco. He consulted more high-level Republicans than you could shake a stick at, and he stamped out the wild-fire of partisan at-

tack before it could be started in earnest.

But the State Department was meagerized, or something close to it, and couldn't seem to pick itself off the floor on the morning after. It failed utterly and dangerously to do its own job of consulting with Congress.

As a result, the Secretary, Dean Rusk, was required to go before the Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee on Latin-American affairs, headed by the aggressive Wayne Morse, of Oregon, a man who knows a Senator's right when he sees it. And Allen W. Dulles of the C. I. A., who would rather not attend meetings of that kind, was likewise compelled to spend several hours with the full Foreign Relations Committee the following day.

As it happened, both Mr. Rusk, the amateur, and Mr. Dulles, the pro, acquitted themselves well, but either might easily have slipped during his long question-and-answer session with the most powerful committee of Congress. And if they had, the Administration might then have come face to face with a full-scale investigation of the kind that the Democrats forced on former President Eisenhower last year when the U-2 fiasco torpedoed the summit conference.

Leads to Trouble

Consultation, or sharing part of the secret, with the proud and prerogative-conscious Senate is a vital aspect of the political game. Failure to know this and act upon it is to open a Pandora's box of unwanted and unnecessary troubles, and to exacerbate the very difficulties that need curing.

The Cuban invasion was launched on Sunday night, April 15. The State Department did not make an effort to get in touch with Sen. Morse, the chairman of the subcommittee that is directly responsible for Latin-American affairs, until

April 26, more than a week after the invasion. The State Department's response to Sen. Morse's demand

for information was a telegram asking for information.

The first Morse message, a telegram to Secretary Rusk asking for a briefing "in keeping with the spirit of the advice and consent clause" of the Constitution, was not even acknowledged, so far as can be determined. And yet it never should have had to be sent. Mr. Rusk and his lieutenants should have reacted automatically to the automatic need to tell the top men of Congress what was going on. The reaction should have been reflex, not forced by a telegram asking for news of what happened.

Sen. Morse dispatched his first appeal for information on April 24. When no reply came, he sent his second on April 26, this one asking Undersecretary of State Chester Bowles to come up and talk to the subcommittee on April 28. But Mr. Bowles replied that he couldn't make it.

Until that moment, Sen. Morse was punctilious in refraining from anything resembling pressure tactics. He knew that Messrs. Rusk and Bowles had a major crisis on their hands. He did not want to obstruct or confuse or get in the way.

Almost Blew Top

But when he got Mr. Bowles' refusal, he almost blew his top—and for a very interesting reason. He knew that high officials in the Administration, including Mr. Bowles and Chip Bohlen and MacGeorge Bundy and others, had been briefing large numbers of editors in the State Department auditorium on the inside story of Cuba. He also knew that some of his Senate colleagues were seriously embarrassed when they were asked by these same editors to give their assessment of the scene behind the scene—and had to beg off because they had never been shown a glimpse of

the inside story. This was not touching Sen. Morse's feelings. With a couple of exceptions, different.

the Foreign Relations Committee was angry. The exceptions were the chairman, Sen. Fulbright, who was the only member of Congress let in on the secret of the invasion before it happened; and the Democratic leaders, Sen. Mansfield and Sen. Humphrey, who had gotten the word at their regular legislative breakfast with President Kennedy on April 18.

Under these circumstances, it is scarcely surprising that Sen. Morse made his speech in the Senate condemning the whole enterprise (the first member to raise the issue on the floor of either House). Nor is it surprising that he then demanded the presence of Mr. Dulles.

Most Important

The Cuban affair was the most important event ever to happen within the jurisdiction of the Morse subcommittee. Except for what they picked up in the newspapers, neither the Morse subcommittee nor the full committee had heard a word about it.

A good argument can be made, and often has been, against consulting members of Congress before an undertaking as risky and as clandestine as the Cuban invasion.

What is not accepted, and should not be accepted, in a government that divides its powers among separate branches, is failure to consult after the event, and particularly at a time when every visiting editor, and every enterprising reporter, was getting selected versions of the inside story from the top.

Relationships between competing power blocs in Washington are sometimes decided irrevocably by errors of no larger dimension than this one, and the result can mean for the offending party. This time, no damage was done. The result was different.